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SIX PLEAD GUILTY TO COCAINE SMUGGLING

United States Attorney Paul I. Perez announced today that six individuals pleaded guilty to conspiring to distribute more than five kilograms of cocaine while on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States. The men were on board a 40 foot "go fast" boat when they were spotted on February 12, 2002, by Coast Guard aircraft dispatched from the Coast Guard Cutter "Hamilton" and "Boutwell" which were on patrol in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. The crew began to throw the bales of cocaine overboard when they were spotted by the Coast Guard helicopters. After firing warning shots, a Coast Guard sharp shooter disabled the engines. Two Coast Guard rigid hull inflatable vessels intercepted the "go fast," and the boarding team took the crew into custody. Approximately three tons of cocaine were recovered and the crew was brought back to Tampa, Florida for prosecution.

The six men are all from Colombia, and they face a mandatory minimum of ten years' to life imprisonment. Those who pleaded guilty are:

Floresmiro Boya-Velasco

Hemerys Hernandez-Calzada

Mario Gonzalez-Altamiranda

Angel Maria Betancour

Hermes Salas

Edgar Leon-Rivera

This investigation is part of Operation Panama Express which is a joint effort of the United States Coast Guard, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the U.S. Marshals Service. This case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Walter E. Furr of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) in the Middle District of Florida.